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This is a pre print version of the following article:

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1664767> since 2019-03-29T11:50:23Z

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IDENTIFICATION OF *FUSARIUM OXYSPORUM* F. SP. *OPUNTiarum*
ON NEW HOSTS OF THE CACTACEAE AND EUPHORBIACEAE
FAMILIES

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Running title: *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* on succulent plants

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SUMMARY

Fusarium oxysporum has recently been detected in commercial nurseries in the Ligurian region (northern Italy) on new succulent plants belonging to the Cactaceae family (*Astrophytum myriostigma*, *Cereus marginatus* var. *cristata*, *C. peruvianus monstuosus* and *C. peruvianus florida*) and to the Euphorbiaceae family (*Euphorbia mammillaris*). The pathogen has been identified, for all the new hosts, from morphological characteristics observed *in vitro*. The identifications have been confirmed by means of ITS (Internal Transcribed Spacer) analysis and/or by Translation Elongation Factor 1 α (TEF) analysis. The aim of this work was to identify the *forma specialis* of the *F. oxysporum* isolates obtained from new succulent plants. This has been investigated by means of phylogenetic analysis, based on the Translation Elongation Factor 1 α gene and intergenic spacer (IGS), carried out on single-spore isolates, together with pathogenicity assays. The results of this research led to include the new isolates from succulent plants in the *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum*. This *forma specialis* has been identified for the first time on a new host (*Euphorbia mammillaris*) not belonging to the Cactaceae family.

Key words: ornamentals, succulent plants, soil-borne pathogens, Fusarium wilt.

INTRODUCTION

The ornamental industry is economically important throughout the world and it also represents an interesting growth opportunity for developing countries. In industrialized countries, ornamental plants are purchased throughout the year by a significant portion of the population, and moving the production of ornamental plants to developing countries would provide a remarkable source of income: in the USA, the wholesale value of floriculture crops was more than 4 billion dollars in 2014 (USDA, 2015); in Canada, the import and export value of ornamental plant products was about 418 and 312 million dollars, respectively, in 2013 (Statistical Overview of the Canadian Ornamental Industry, 2013); in Europe, the importing of live plants and floriculture products reached more than 1,500 million Euros in 2014 (European Commission, Agriculture and rural development, 2015).

The ornamental industry in Italy is important in the agricultural sector because of its favourable climatic conditions and specific economic situations that positively influence the economic returns, with a production of about 2,670 million Euros in 2011 (Schimmenti *et al.*, 2013). The value of the production of plants and flowers in the European Union was 21 billion Euros in 2013. Italy ranks second after the Netherlands and before Germany, with a share of 13.7% of the total value (Vanderelst and Zolichova, 2014). In 2013, the production of ornamental and flowering plants represented 5.4% of the total production in the agricultural sector in Italy (INEA, 2014). In 2010, a total of 4,271 farms producing ornamental and flowering plants were located in the Ligurian region, over an area of about 2,672 hectares (ISTAT, 2010). Various different new genera and species are exploited in this region, because of their commercial importance. A particular fragment of the ornamental industry is that of succulent plants, which currently show a good market potential.

The diversity of the crops and varieties, the effect of globalisation and of the intensive productions all lead to a multiplication of the number of potential pests and diseases that are able to infect new hosts. More than 120 different *formae speciales* of *F. oxysporum* have been described (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1981; O'Donnell and Cigelnik, 1999; Baayen *et al.*, 2000; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009; Leslie, 2012). The detection and identification of *formae speciales*, which are classically based on pathogenicity assays (Recorbet *et al.*, 2003), are at present supported by molecular diagnostic tools (Lievens *et al.*, 2012). Several markers have been developed, on the basis of DNA sequences, in order to identify different *formae speciales* (Baayen *et al.*, 2000; Groenewald *et al.*, 2006). Genomic regions, such as the intergenic spacer region (IGS) or the Elongation factor (TEF), are useful but not enough for a correct identification (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2009).

Over the last few years, Fusarium rot or wilt symptoms have appeared on five new succulent hosts grown as potted plants in commercial nurseries located in the Imperia province (Liguria region, northern Italy). The new hosts were succulent plants belonging to the Cactaceae family, that is, *Astrophytum myriostigma* (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2015b), *Cereus peruvianus monstruosus* (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2011), *C. peruvianus florida* (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2015a) and *C. marginatus* var. *cristata* (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2014) as well as to the Euphorbiaceae family, that is, *Euphorbia mammillaris* (Garibaldi *et al.*, 2015c). *Fusarium oxysporum* has been isolated and identified as the causal agent of the diseases on all the host plants by means of morphological and molecular methods.

The aim of this work was to investigate the *forma specialis* of the new isolates of *F. oxysporum* obtained from succulent plants.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Fungal isolates. The *F. oxysporum* isolates were obtained from diseased plants, placing on Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA) and/or Komada Fusarium selective medium (Komada, 1975) small pieces taken from the margin of affected tissues. To obtain pure isolates, colonies were subcultured on Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA). Two *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* strains coming from different collections were used as reference isolates. To obtain the single-spore isolates used in this work (Table 1), a fungal suspension of each isolate was prepared in Potato Dextrose Broth (PDB), shaking cultures (90 r.p.m.) at 25°C for 10 days. Then, each suspension was diluted to 1×10^{-8} CFU/ml. A drop from more diluted concentrations was subcultured on Komada selective medium. Single germinated microconidia were selected using an optical microscope.

Pathogenicity essays. The isolates listed in table 2 were artificially inoculated on *Schlumbergera truncata* plants, which are notoriously susceptible to *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* (Lops *et al.*, 2013). The plants were inoculated by wounding the stems (3 lesions/plant) with a sterilized needle contaminated with spores and mycelium taken from pure PDA cultures of the isolates (Talgø and Stensvand, 2013). Control plants were wounded with sterilized needles without any inoculum. All the plants were maintained under greenhouse conditions, at temperatures ranging from 20 to 35°C and at RH ranging from 40 to 65%.

Furthermore, two *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* reference isolates (Table 3) were inoculated on each new host and on *S. truncata* for comparison purposes. Three plants were inoculated for each isolate (3 wounds/plant), according to the method described by Talgø and Stensvand, 2013. The control plants were wounded with sterilized needles without any inoculum. All the plants were kept in a greenhouse, at the same environmental conditions described above.

After the first symptoms of rot appeared around the needles on the inoculated plants, the severity of *Fusarium* rot was evaluated every 4-7 days by measuring the size of the rotted area and by removing the dead plants. The presence of *Fusarium* symptoms was assessed using a 0 to 100 scale, where 0 indicates the absence of rot; 25: rot diameter of 0 to 5 mm; 50: rot diameter of 5 to 10 mm; 75: rot diameter of 10 to 20 mm; 100: rot diameter of more than 20 mm. The disease index was then calculated using the following formula: $(25n_1+50n_2+75n_3+100n_4)/(n_0+n_1+n_2+n_3+n_4)$, where n_0 is the number of rotting areas that scored 0; n_1 is the number of rotting areas that scored 25; n_4 is the number of rotting areas that scored 100. Finally, each tested species was classified in 5 susceptibility classes: R = Resistant (disease index 0–5); PR = Partially Resistant (disease index 6–20); AS = Averagely Susceptible (disease index 21–50); S = Susceptible (disease index 51–75); HS = Highly Susceptible (disease index 76–100) (Tables 2 and 3).

DNA extraction. DNA extraction was carried out using an E.Z.N.A. Fungal DNA Mini Kit (Omega Bio-Tek), according to the manufacturer's instructions. Fresh mycelium was obtained for each isolate listed in table 1 in 50ml of a liquid PDB culture incubated at 25°C. The cultures were filtered after 6 days and 50µg of mycelium was transferred to a 2 ml tube containing 400 µL of lysis buffer and two tungsten beads (Qiagen Stainless Steel Beads, 5 mm). Homogenization was performed using Qiagen TissueLyser for 4 min with 30 repetitions per minute, and the obtained lysate was used for DNA extraction. The DNA concentration was measured using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer, and the extracted DNA was stored at -20°C until further use.

PCR amplification. *Elongation factor 1-α (EF1-α)* and intergenic spacer (IGS) regions were used for the phylogenetic analysis. *EF-1α* was amplified with the EF1/EF2 primers (Table 4) using a T100 Thermal cycler (Biorad) in a 20 µL reaction mixture containing: 10 ng of gDNA, 1 µL of 10 µM stock (final concentration 0.5 µM) of each primer, 1 unit of Taq

DNA polymerase (Qiagen), 2 μ L of PCR buffer 10 \times , 1 μ L of dNTPs stock (final concentration 0.25 mM) and 0.8 μ L of MgCl₂ (final concentration 1 mM). Amplification was carried out with an initial denaturing step at 94°C for 5 min, followed by 35 denaturation cycles at 94°C for 1 min, annealing at 58°C for 1 min, extension at 72°C for 1 min and final extension at 72°C for 7 min. For the IGS amplification, a PCR reaction was performed in a 50 μ L reaction mixture containing: 30 ng of gDNA, 5 μ L of 10 μ M stock (final concentration 1 μ M) of primers CNL12 and CNS1 (Table 5), 3 units of Taq DNA polymerase (Qiagen), 5 μ L of PCR buffer 10 \times , 5 μ L of dNTPs stock (final concentration 0.25 mM) and 10 μ L of 5X Q solution to amplify the G-C rich regions. A negative control (no template DNA) was included in all the experiments. Amplifications were checked by electrophoresis on 1% agarose gel (Agarose D-1 LOW EEO, Eppendorf). After purification with a QIAquick PCR purification kit (Qiagen), the PCR products were measured using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer and were then sent to Macrogen for sequencing (<http://www.macrogen.com/eng/>). *EF-1 α* was sequenced in both directions, while the two internal primers CNS and CRU were also used for the IGS region. The sequences were deposited at GenBank and the accession numbers are listed in table 5.

Alignment and phylogenetic analysis. Similarity searches (BLASTN, default parameters) were performed for all the obtained sequences before a phylogenetic analysis was performed. The sequences were then considered for CLUSTALW multiple sequence alignments using MEGA6 software set to the default parameters. The sequences were corrected manually for each alignment in order to delete any external trimmer regions and discard any incomplete sequences. Phylogenetic trees were constructed in MEGA6 (Tamura et al. 2013) using the Neighbor joining method with 1,000 bootstrap repeats and the pairwise deletion option. The evolutionary distances were computed using the Tajima-Nei method, and are in the units of the number of base substitutions per site. Sequences derived from

different *F. oxysporum formae speciales* obtained from the GenBank database were included in each analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fungal isolates. The single-spore isolates selected for this work are listed in table 1.

Pathogenicity essays. After the artificial inoculation on *Schlumbergera truncata*, all the isolates listed in table 2 developed necrosis around the wounds, only on the inoculated stems. The necrosis then became extended as far as the stems that rotted, whereas the controls remained healthy. *F. oxysporum* was consistently re-isolated from symptomatic plants for all the new hosts. *S. truncata* showed high susceptibility to all the tested isolates, including the *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* reference isolates (Table 2).

Furthermore, all the artificially inoculated succulent hosts were also susceptible to various degrees to the *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* isolates, as reported in table 3.

Molecular phylogenetic analysis of the *EF-1 α* region. Amplification of the *EF-1 α* gene resulted in 750bp fragments of DNA. After multi-alignment with other *formae speciales* present in Genbank, the obtained sequences were used for the phylogenetic analyses. The results of the analyses showed that the isolates obtained from *Astrophytum myriostigma*, *Cereus peruvianus monstrosus*, *C. peruvianus florida*, *C. marginatus* var. *cristata* and *Euphorbia mammillaris* were included in *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum*, with a 66 bootstrap value (Fig. 1). Two different reference strains were used in this cluster: *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* CBS 743.79 and a strain isolated from barrel cactus (*Echinocactus grusonii*) in Italy (Polizzi and Vitale, 2004). The sequences used for the phylogenetic analysis were deposited at Genbank (Table 5).

Molecular phylogenetic analysis of the IGS region. As observed for the *EF 1- α* analysis, all the isolates in the analysis based on the IGS sequences also grouped together within the *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* clade with a high bootstrap value (100) (Fig. 2). A reference sequence deposited by O'Donnell et al. in 2009 was used for this phylogenetic tree. A 1994 bp sequence was obtained for each isolate, and the sequences used for the phylogenetic analysis were deposited at Genbank (Table 5).

Phylogenetic analysis permitted to include the new *F. oxysporum* isolates from succulents in f. sp. *opuntiarum*, according to the results of the pathogenicity essays. These last showed that all the new isolates were pathogenic on *Schlumbergera truncata*, and when inoculated, provided the same effect as that caused by the tested *F. opuntiarum* reference strains. These last also caused disease on all the artificially inoculated new succulent hosts.

Fusarium oxysporum has been identified as the causal agent of stem and root rot on different hosts belonging to the Cactaceae family: *Echinocactus grusonii* in England (Hazelgrove, 1979), *Zygocactus truncatus* in the U.S.A. (Moorman and Klemmer, 1980), *Schlumbergera truncata* (Petrone et al., 2007) and *Hylocereus undatus* in Argentina (Wright et al., 2007). *F. oxysporum* on Cactaceae has been identified as belonging to f. sp. *opuntiarum*: on *Zygocactus* and *Rhipsalidopsis* in Germany (Gerlach, 1972), on *Opuntia ficus-indica* in Brazil (Souza de et al., 2010), on *Echinocactus grusonii* (Polizzi and Vitale, 2004) and *Schlumbergera truncata* in Italy (Lops et al., 2013). Moreover, on new succulent hosts belonging to Crassulaceae family (*Crassula ovata*, *Echeveria agavoides* and *E. tolimanensis*) two new *formae speciales*, named f. sp. *crassulae* (Ortu et al., 2013) and f. sp. *echeveriae* (Ortu et al., 2015; Garibaldi et al., 2015d), respectively, have been recently identified. Up to the present, *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* has only been identified on Cactaceae, and it has never been detected on hosts belonging to other families: this *forma specialis* is reported on *Euphorbia mamillaris*, Euphorbiaceae family, for the first time.

Some strains of *F. oxysporum* isolated from diseased wild *Euphorbia* spp. in European countries have been shown to be virulent when artificially inoculated for the biological control of leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*) (Caesar, 1996). *F. oxysporum* was also isolated from affected poinsettias (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) (Orlikowski *et al.*, 2007). Nevertheless, the *forma specialis* was never investigated in any of these cases. Usually, *formae speciales* of *F. oxysporum* are assigned on the basis of their ability to infect a specific host. However, the acquisition of a pathogenicity genes by horizontal transfer is common on *F. oxysporum* species complex (Van der Does and Rep, 2007). In addition, *F. oxysporum* genome is about 70% larger compared to *F. verticilloides* with a more large intergenic regions, as well as the possibility of rearrange his genome by the high presence of transposable element sequences. The common presence of different transposable elements (Daboussi and Capy, 2003) suggests the ability to genomic rearrangement in response to the selection pressure, as well as to the intensive cultivation of host crop plants.

Because a large number of succulent species and cultivars are grown in the same farms, there is the risk of spread of *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* among the susceptible hosts listed above. In these farms of intense floriculture, strategies to avoid the diffusion of *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* are particularly recommended, especially in the case of rooted cuttings production. Finally, there is the necessity to test the susceptibility to this pathogen of the most diffused succulent plants in the Italian market, specially Cactaceae and Euphorbiaceae, to provide growers with a list of resistant and/or tolerant species and cultivars.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 634179 "Effective Management of Pests and Harmful Alien Species - Integrated Solutions" (EMPHASIS)

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369

370 Table 1. The *Fusarium oxysporum* single-isolates used in this study.

Strain	Host plant	Place
DB13GIU05-22M	<i>Cereus marginatus</i>	Italy
DB13GIU06-26M	<i>Cereus marginatus</i>	Italy
DB210211-18M	<i>Cereus peruvianus monstrosus</i>	Italy
DB220211-21M	<i>Cereus peruvianus monstrosus</i>	Italy
DB14OTT05-M1	<i>Astrophytum myriostigma</i>	Italy
DB14OTT07-M1	<i>Astrophytum myriostigma</i>	Italy
DB14NOV08-M1	<i>Cereus peruvianus florida</i>	Italy
DB14NOV09-M1	<i>Cereus peruvianus florida</i>	Italy
DB14OTT16-M1	<i>Euphorbia mammillaris</i>	Italy
DB14OTT17-M1	<i>Euphorbia mammillaris</i>	Italy
Polizzi-31M (<i>F. oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> reference strain)	<i>Echinocactus grusonii</i>	Italy
CBS 743.79 (<i>F. oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> reference strain)	<i>Zygocactus truncatus</i>	Germany

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Table 2. Pathogenicity test carried out on *Schlumbergera truncata* plants artificially inoculated with *Fusarium oxysporum* isolates obtained from succulent plants.

<i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> tested isolates	Susceptibility of <i>Schlumbergera truncata</i>
Controls	R*
DB13GIU05-22M (from <i>Cereus marginatus</i>)	HS
DB13GIU06-26M (from <i>Cereus marginatus</i>)	HS
DB210211-18M (from <i>Cereus peruvianus monstrosus</i>)	HS
DB220211-21M (from <i>Cereus peruvianus monstrosus</i>)	HS
DB14OTT07-M1 (from <i>Astrophytum myriostigma</i>)	HS
DB14NOV09-M1 (from <i>Cereus peruvianus florida</i>)	HS
DB14OTT16-M1 (from <i>Euphorbia mammillaris</i>)	HS
<i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> Polizzi-31M	HS
<i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> CBS 743.79	HS

*R = Resistant (disease index 0–5); PR = Partially Resistant (disease index 6–20); AS = Averagely Susceptible (disease index 21–50); S = Susceptible (disease index 51–75); HS = Highly Susceptible (disease index 76–100).

Table 3. Susceptibility of succulent species artificially inoculated with *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *opuntiarum* isolates.

Tested species	<i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> tested isolates		
	Controls	Polizzi-31M	CBS 743.79
<i>Astrophytum myriostigma</i>	R*	HS	HS
<i>Cereus marginatus</i>	R	AS	AS
<i>Cereus peruvianus Monstruosus</i>	R	AS	S
<i>Cereus peruvianus florida</i>	R	HS	HS
<i>Euphorbia mammillaris</i>	R	AS	AS

*R = Resistant (disease index 0–5); PR = Partially Resistant (disease index 6–20); AS = Averagely Susceptible (disease index 21–50); S = Susceptible (disease index 51–75); HS = Highly Susceptible (disease index 76–100).

Table 4. Primers used to amplify polygalacturonase genes.

Gene	Primer	Nucleotide Sequences (5'→3')	Source
<i>EF-1α</i>	Ef1	ATGGGTAAGGAAGACAAGAC	O'Donnell <i>et al.</i> , 1998
	Ef2	GGAAGTACCAGTGATCATGTT	
<i>IGS</i>	CNS1	CCAGAGTGCCGATACCGATT	Appel and Gordon, 1995
	CNL12	GCTTAGYGAACAKGGAGTG	

Table 5. Accession numbers of the *EF-1 α* and IGS sequences obtained from *Fusarium oxysporum* and deposited in the GenBank database.

Isolates	Accession numbers in GenBank	
	<i>EF-1α</i>	IGS
DB13GIU05-22M	KU575888	KU575870
DB13GIU06-26M	KU575889	KU575871
DB210211-18M	KU575886	KU575872
DB220211-21M	KU575887	KU575873
DB14OTT05-M1	KU575882	KU575876
DB14OTT07-M1	KT183483	KU575877
DB14NOV08-M1	KU575885	KU575878
DB14NOV09-M1	KT183484	KU575879
DB14OTT16-M1	KT183485	KU575880
DB14OTT17-M1	KU575883	KU575881
<i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> Polizzi-31M	KU575890	KU575868
<i>Fusarium oxysporum</i> f. sp. <i>opuntiarum</i> CBS 743.79	KU575891	KU575869

FIGURE LEGENDS

Figure 1. Phylogenetic tree based on the *EF-1 α* gene sequences, built by means of Mega5 software with the Neighbor joining method, using default parameters, and a standard bootstrapping with 1,000 replicates.

Figure 2. Phylogenetic tree based on the IGS sequences, built by means of Mega5 software with the Neighbor joining method, using default parameters, and a standard bootstrapping with 1,000 replicates.



